

The Peaceable Kingdom

A sermon by the Very Reverend Sam Candler
The Second Sunday of Advent – Year A
Isaiah 11:1-10
Matthew 3:1-12



*The wolf shall live with the lamb,
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
the calf and the lion and the fatling together,
and a little child shall lead them.*

*The cow and the bear shall graze,
their young shall lie down together;
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.
The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,
and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.*

*They will not hurt or destroy
on all my holy mountain;
for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD
as the waters cover the sea. (Isaiah 11:6-9)*

As visions of heaven go, visions of the Promised Land, visions of the kingdom of God, this one, from Isaiah, is surely one of the most beautiful. Isaiah paints a picture of peace and safety, a place where former enemies, even natural enemies, are reconciled. Wolves live with lambs; cows and bears graze together. They will not hurt or destroy. It's a beautiful painting of the kingdom of God.

On this Second Sunday of Advent, the day on which we conduct the annual parish meeting of the Cathedral Parish of St.

Philip, it is good for our parish to receive this vision. It is good to receive Isaiah's vision as our heavenly goal, a picture, a painting, of peace and reconciliation.

I hope many of you heard Todd Smelser's sermon from this pulpit a few weeks ago, a sermon in which he mentioned a particular painting. Many of you know the piece of art, a painting called *The Peaceable Kingdom*, by the nineteenth century painter, Edward Hicks. I salute Canon Smelser's citation of it a few weeks ago, and today I want to broaden that citation.

I must acknowledge that I am personally drawn to the work of Edward Hicks. My initial reasons are personal: First, the painter, Edward Hicks, was the great-great-great uncle of my wife. My wife's mother was named Hicks. Second, Edward Hicks was a Quaker, and many of my own ancestors were also Quakers; the first Clanders arrived in America because they had been frustrated and socially ostracized by religious prejudices; so, they actually became Quakers when they settled in Virginia.

But the primary reason I like the Quaker Edward Hicks, like many of you, is his famous painting titled *The Peaceable Kingdom*. It's a soft and serene work, almost child-like in its folksy simplicity. A calm lion and lamb are together. A leopard saunters across the canvas. And, indeed, a child is standing on top of the lion, holding on to the leopard and leading the way. There are also other people in the painting, but they are smaller, in the distance, across a small ravine; they are said to be the people of William Penn, the Quaker who helped start the new world colony of Pennsylvania.

Can you remember having seen that painting somewhere? Okay, where did you see it? Ha! That question, "Where did you see it?" is a trick question!

In fact, the artist Edward Hicks painted many versions of that same scene. A famous version hangs in the National Gallery of Art, in Washington, DC. But another beautiful version is in the Brooklyn Museum. Still another *Peaceable Kingdom*, again, a true original, hangs in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City. The Philadelphia Museum of Art has still another original painting. And, just so the south is not forgotten, there is a beautiful Edward Hicks *Peaceable Kingdom* in the Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts, Montgomery, AL.

Wow. All told, it is estimated that Edward Hicks painted this painting sixty-one times. That's almost as many versions as there are books of the Bible. In each one, wolves and lambs and leopards and kids and fatlings rest together; a child leads them.

The child, of course, represents the messiah, just as we imagine the coming of a messianic child this time of year. But, for Hicks, the child also represented liberty and innocent freedom from autocratic oppression. Hicks painted about freedom from kings and princes and imperial institutions.

The very fact that Hicks painted this painting sixty-one times, demonstrates to us that it can be painted again. In fact, it needs to be painted again, in our time. What would the lions and lambs and cattle and oxen and bears and cows of our peaceable kingdom look like today?

Maybe it would start with Tech fans and Georgia fans rooting together? Well, it would get more serious than that. Blacks and whites in the same neighborhood. Southerners and northerners. Samaritans and Jews. Muslims and Christians.

What are the divisions of our time? The rich and the poor. South side and north side. Inside the perimeter and outside the perimeter. City of Atlanta and Fulton County. Democrats and Republicans. Conservatives and liberals.

The peaceable kingdom of Isaiah, the peaceable kingdom of Edward Hicks, the peaceable kingdom of our time, is a vision worth repeating again and again. Isaiah mentioned it a couple of times. Edward Hicks painted it sixty-one times. We have heard it in our church more times than that.

Let me return to Edward Hicks. Apparently, the older Hicks became, the more he realized that the true enemy of humanity lay within each of us, in our selfish egos and greedy desires. As a Quaker, he began to emphasize the Inner Light, a true light that also resides within every human soul. As Hicks painted, more light appears in his work.

But something else happened as Hicks grew older. He began to experience real division and conflict, even within the calm and peaceful Quaker denomination. Quakers began disagreeing, and their vision of a peaceable kingdom started crumbling. So, Hicks paints this phenomenon. In his later versions of *The Peaceable Kingdom*, the child is smaller and plays a lesser role. The animals are snarling and swiping at each other. And, then, the animals grow older! Their whiskers become gray and white, and their eyes become sunken, sad, and tired.

Viewing the scope of Hicks' paintings is thus an amazing study of the natural hopes and the natural declines of our hopes for a peaceable kingdom. We grow older, and sometimes sadder. Will a peaceable kingdom ever come?

Finally, Edward Hicks' last paintings are not of the original scene at all. They are of farms, all nicely ordered with fences and barns, and neatly kept. In his very last painting, of David Leedom's farm, the most dominant aspect of the painting is simply the sky—full of glorious light—the Inner Light which shines over all.

One might say that Hicks' peaceable kingdom begins with a vision of natural rivals resting together, then sadly snarling and threatening, and then finally fading into glorious light.

So goes our vision of the peaceable kingdom, too. It needs repeating and refreshing. In these Advent days before Christmas, each of us is aware of divisions that long to be reconciled. Some might be playful divisions, but others are deadly serious.

Sometimes the reconciliation is not just compromise. This week, we remember again that blacks and whites did not live together equally in South Africa until Nelson Mandela spent twenty-seven years in prison.

From the Gospel of Matthew today, we remember that John the Baptist was not a compromiser either. John the Baptist called his enemies a den of snakes. "You brood of vipers," he said, "who warned you?" (Mathew 3:7).

Reconcilers are people like Nelson Mandela who was able not just to see, but to live out, a vision, a vision where nursing children could indeed "play over the hole of snake, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the snake's den" (Isaiah 11:8).

Reconciliation does not mean compromise. Reconciliation occurs when the Inner Light becomes so strong and bright, that what we thought were divisions are not divisions at all. Reconciliation means that we get smaller, and God's light gets larger.

As we prepare for Christmas, then, as we conduct the annual meeting of the Cathedral Parish of St. Philip, let us see again this vision: the vision of Isaiah, the vision of Edward Hicks, the vision of so many of us who belong to this church. The world needs the reconciliation that only God can provide.

It is we, the church, and we, the Cathedral of St. Philip, who paint this canvas, year in and year out, repeated again and again. We, the Church, are the sign, the painting! We are to be the vision, which shows people that "the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea" (Isaiah 11:9).

AMEN.

The Very Reverend Samuel G. Candler
Dean of the Cathedral of St. Philip

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